DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 179 CS 507 184

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TITLE Instructional Implications of the Social Cognitive Process in Small Discussion Groups.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (81st, Philadelphia, PA, April 19-22, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discussion Groups; Evaluative Thinking; Higher Education; Inferences; Intuition; *Models; Organizational Communication; *Participative Decision Making; *Problem Solving
IDENTIFIERS Group Attitudes; *Group Theory; *Small Group Communication

ABSTRACT

One of the most valuable skills in group decision making is the ability to make trustworthy judgments about group performance. It follows from the "inferential model" of social cognition (Pavitt, 1989; Pavitt & Hight, 1986), that there are three types of judgments relevant to the group context: (1) behavioral (what the group did); (2) dispositional (what kind of group it is); and (3) evaluative (how good the group is). People rely most heavily on evaluative judgments, because they serve as intuitively satisfying explanations for evaluative judgments while each provides a shorthand for a large quantity of behavioral judgments. However, behavioral judgments are the basis for dispositional and evaluative judgments, and it is at the level of behavioral judgments that recommendations for improving the group's performance can best be provided. Thus, curriculum in small group discussion (along with other performance areas in communication) should encourage students to become more aware of the behaviors their group performs along with the dispositional and evaluative judgments they more naturally make. (Author)

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Instructional Implications of the Social Cognitive Process in Small Discussion Groups

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Instructional Implications of the Social Cognitive Process in Small Discussion Groups

Abstract

One of the most valuable skills in group decision making is the ability to make trustworthy judgments about group performance. It follows from the "inferential model" of social cognition (Pavitt, 1989; Pavitt & Haight, 1986), that there are three types of judgments relevant to the group context; behavioral (what the group did), dispositional (what kind of group it is), and evaluative (how good the group is). People rely most heavily on evaluative judgments, because they serve as intuitively satisfying explanations for evaluative judgments while each provides a shorthand for a large quantity of behavioral judgments. However, behavioral judgments are the basis for dispositional and evaluative judgments, and it is at the level of behavioral judgments that recommendations for improving the group's performance can best be provided. Thus, curriculum in small group discussion (along with other performance areas in communication) should encourage students to become more aware of the behaviors their group performs along with the dispositional and evaluatiive judgments they more naturally make.

Instructional Implications of the Social Cognitive Process in Small Discussion Groups

Among the more valuable skills that a person can contribute to a discussion group is the ability to make trustworthy judgments and evaluations of their group's performance. Such judgments are helpful because they provide the potential for improved group performance in subsequent discussions. The goal of this essay is to provide a framework for analyzing the judgmental process in group discussion, and to describe some implications of this framework for instruction in small group discussion classes.

The foundation of the framework is the "inferential" model for social cognition, which has had some success in accounting for the judgmental process in interpersonal settings (Pavitt, 1989; Pavitt & Haight, 1986). In summary, the inferential model includes two parts; a structure consisting of knowledge about a particular communicative context, and a process by which this knowledge is used in making judgments about specific communicators. More specifically, the structure consists of the observer's preconceptions, or "implicit theories," of what ideal communicators in the relevant situation are like. It includes two types of attributes: <u>behaviors</u> representing what the ideal communicator does ("the ideal communicator speaks moderately quickly") and <u>traits</u> representing what type of person the ideal communicator is ("the ideal communicator is relaxed"). Implicit communication theories also include the relationship perceived as existing among attributes (i.e., "people who speak moderately

quickly tend to be relaxed").

The model also proposes that an observer's judgments about a communicator are made through a two-step process. First, the observer forms an impression of the communicator. This impression starts with behaviors that the observer sees the communicator perform ("she is speaking very quickly") and also includes the other attributes that are associated with the observed behavior in the observer's implicit theory ("she must be nervous"). Second, the observer makes an evaluation of the communicator's skill, by comparing the impression to the relevant implicit theory ("the ideal communicator speaks moderately quickly and is relaxed, so she must be a poor communicator"). Past research has examined the structure of implicit theory in the context of communicative competence (Pavitt & Haight, 1986) and found evidence consistent with the proposed process within that context (Pavitt, 1989).

The inferential model has several implications for the small discussion group. The most direct of these is that group members will use a similar process in making judgments and evaluations of one another's contributions to the group. Recent research has examined students' implicit theories about group leadership, and related these preconceptions to judgments and evaluations made of one another by members of zero-history and standing discussion groups (Pavitt & Sackaroff, 1989). Thus far, we have found that judgments made within standing groups are less associated with implicit theory and more idiosyncratic than judgments made within zero-history groups. This finding is probably a consequent of the specific knowledge about one another that members of standing

groups should possess. Practically speaking, this research gives us an indication of the types of behaviors that should be performed if group members wish to be perceived by one another as competent contributors to group leadership, while allowing for the prediction of the judgments and evaluations that will be made about a group member given that member's actions.

More significant for our present concerns are the implications of the inferential model for judgments of the group as a whole. We must assume that the manner in which group members make judgments about their group is similar to the manner in which they make judgments about one another. It follows from the model that there are three types of judgments that group members can make. The first are behavioral; judgments concerning the actual behaviors that members perform during discussion. A group member could judge, for example, that group members encouraged one another, or that group members verbally rejected one another's proposals. The second are dispositional; judgments concerned with the "traits" of the group. A group member could judge their group, for example, to be cohesive or to be uncompromising. The third are evaluative; judgments of whether the group's discussion, or particular aspects of it, are good or bad. I would expect that the manner in which these judgments are made is consistent with the inferential model. In other words, based on implicit theories of group activity, a member may judge their group to be cohesive, which is good, because its members encouraged one another, or as uncompromising, which is bad, because its members verbally rejected one another's proposals.

Note in this description the central role played by the dispositional judgment in the abstract form of the inferences ("a group has a disposition, which is evaluated, based on behaviors"). Evidence exists that dispositional judgments indeed play the central role in social judgments. First, single dispositions usually serve as a shorthand description for a number of behaviors (Wyer & Gordon, 1982). Cohesive group members not only encourage one another, but also laugh, smile, lean inward, and talk more. As a consequence, people act as if they implicitly believe that once a disposition has been attributed to a social object, the behaviors need no longer be considered and, for the sake of cognitive efficiency, can be forgotten (Pavitt, 1989). Second, dispositional judgments serve as the direct basis for evaluations (Shweder & D'Andrade, 1980). As a result, dispositional judgments are more closely associated with evaluations than are behavioral judgments (Pavitt, 1989). In other words, people appear to act as if dispositional judgments are a sufficient explanation for evaluations ("we had a bad discussion because we were not cohesive and did not compromise"). These two roles interact; if dispositions explain evaluations, one need not remember the behaviors, and if one forgets the behaviors, they cannot be used for later evaluations.

The problem with this is that while dispositional judgments may serve as an explanation for group evaluations which satisfies most people, they are not conducive to improvements in performance. Telling one's group that they are not sufficiently "cohesive" or "compromising" may alert the other group members to the group's shortcomings in a general sense but will not help the

group with the specific task of fixing them. The reason for this is that dispositions are abstractions. One cannot perform a "cohesive" or a "compromise." In other words, it would be reasonable for group members to ask what they had to do in order to be cohesive. It would be more helpful to tell one's group that they should, for example, encourage one another and respond to proposals with which they disagree without complete rejection. At the very least, these labels may be close enough to the actual behavior ("Good job, Jane"; "Well, let's think about that idea") that it is far more likely that group members would not have to ask how to do them.

I am not arguing that group members should not make dispositional and evaluative judgments of their group. On the contrary, it is critical for a group to judge their degree of cohesiveness and overall tendency to compromise, along with good/bad evaluations of these dispositions. I am claiming that group members should not lose sight of the behaviors that they performed which led to their dispositional and evaluative judgments, and that they be able to conceive of the behaviors that they would need to do in order to improve upon performances they are unsatisfied with. It is for this reason that I argue for a curriculum for the small group discussion course that encourages, and includes training in the recognition of behaviors along with making dispositional and evaluative judgments.

While I cannot give a comprehensive instructional plan for creating this awareness in students, I can describe some tactics that I use in teaching that appear to be successful. First, I dedicate one class period specifically to the issue. I begin

this class with a short discussion of the social inference process, and distinguish between (1) observation and inference, and (2) behavioral, dispositional, and evaluative judgments. Next, I show the class a short videotaped interaction, and ask the students to report what they see. Any dispositional judgments ("she looks nervous") are shown to be inferences and not observations ("what's a 'nervous' look like? can you point at one?"). I then show the videotape several more times, while leading the class through some detailed behavioral analyses of the interaction, such as counting the number of hand movements made or questions asked by the interactants. The purpose of these exercises is to direct the students' attention to the behavioral level of judgment.

Second, class members perform two assignments which are partially intended to reinforce this attention. The students form themselves into permanent groups of approximately five members. Soon afterwards, the group conducts a twenty minute discussion while being videotaped. Each group gets a copy of the videotape, and then each student writes a four or five page paper discussing the group's performance, based on what they see on the videotape and their recollections. Each of the areas covered in the paper (such as cohesiveness, conflict, leadership, and the like) must be analyzed on the behavioral, dispositional, and evaluative level. My evaluations of the papers are based on the students' success at linking all three types of judgments within each level. Each group also performs a long-term project, such as a detailed analysis of a real-life group decision-making meeting or a research study relevant to group interaction. The

ability to make judgments on all three levels is again central to my evaluations of the group's performance.

There is circumstantial evidence in the Pavitt and Sackaroff (1989) study for the success of these tactics. In that study, the members of zero-history groups had not been students in small-group discussion classes, while the members of standing groups had. For members of zero-history groups, evaluative judgments of one another were correlated at about .7 with both behavioral and dispositional judgments of one another. In other words, students without small-group discussion experience seemed to base their evaluations of one another almost equally on traits and behaviors. In contrast, for members of standing groups, evaluative judgments were correlated at about .7 with behavioral judgments but only about .35 with dispositional judgments. In other words, despite several weeks of acquaintanceship, students with small-group discussion experience appear to have primarily based their evaluations of one another's leadership on the behaviors each perceived the other to have performed during the discussion, as I had stressed in class.

I have concentrated on the small discussion group in this paper, but many of the considerations I have discussed are also relevant to the judgmental process in other formal, face-to-face communication settings. The manner by which the public speaker or oral interpreter is judged by their audience, or the interviewee by their interviewer, should also be consistent with the inferential model. In other words, in all of these situations, dispositional judgments of the communicator will be made by observers and will serve as a major basis for evaluations

of the communicator's performance. Nonetheless, any discussion of the reasons for the dispositional and evaluative judgments that the audience makes, and any recommendations for improvements that the audience and the instructor make, can best be provided at the behavioral level. Thus, a concern for the behaviors performed, along with the impression left by the performer on the audience, should be central to the instructional process. The hoped-for result will be an awareness of the importance of and distinction between different types of communication-relevant judgments on the part of students in their roles both as oral communicators and as critical evaluators of communication.

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